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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 COTONOU 000875

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SUBJECT: PARLIAMENT WELCOMES USG'S TOUR D'HORIZON ON US/BENIN
COOPERATION AND FOCUS ON MCA-BENIN

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¶1. Summary: In a November 13, 2007 speech, the Ambassador outlined major elements of the USG/Benin cooperative partnership for economic growth and trade, investing in people, poverty reduction, anti-corruption, and regional peace and security in a well-attended National Assembly session in Porto Novo. Assembly President Mathurin Coffin Nago warmly welcomed and thanked her for the USG's support of Benin and its development objectives. In an afternoon session, Mr. Simon Pierre Adovelande, National Coordinator for the Millennium Challenge Account Compact (MCA-Benin), accompanied by the MCC Resident Director and Deputy, explained the program and addressed the legislators' questions and concerns about Compact projects. Given the Assembly's decision-making role in policy reform, its support will be key to the success of MCC Compact projects. End summary.

¶2. The Ambassador's November 13 speech before Benin's Parliament focused on the dynamic partnership between the USG and the Government of Benin (GOB), which features cooperation with a range of national and international interlocutors from the GOB, civil society, and NGOs to bilateral and multilateral donors. She said that the partnership was based on shared goals of investing in people; fostering economic growth and development via assistance and trade; combating corruption, and trafficking in drugs and people, and terrorism; protecting human rights and promoting regional stability, including maritime awareness, peace and security. She highlighted various USG programs including those implemented by MCC, USAID, Peace Corps, DOD, DOS, NOAA, CDC, and the African Development Foundation.

¶3. MCC: Noting the extensive, collaborative development of the MCA Benin program with all elements of Benin's society, the Ambassador outlined significant USG contributions via the MCC program and highlighted the four-part program's main elements. These include: promotion of access to markets, notably via reform and extension of the Port of Cotonou, access to land (formalization of land titles) and access to financial and justice sectors. While praising Benin's implementation of the Compact, she also warned that continued eligibility for MCC support depends on meeting selection criteria, principally for anti-corruption, a serious constraint to growth and development.

¶4. USAID: USAID programs with a range of domestic and international development partners invest in people, notably in the education and health sectors, and promote democracy, gender equality, anti-violence against women, and anti-child trafficking. USAID programs, such as the Women's Legal Rights' Project, have resulted in new laws to protect children, women and the family. Also, Benin's selection for the President's Malaria Initiative (PMI) and the Women's Justice and Empowerment Initiative (WJEI) was in large part due to the country's commitment in these areas.

¶5. Peace Corps: Celebrating 40 uninterrupted years in Benin in 2008, Peace Corps programs and its current 98 Peace Corps Volunteers reinforce U.S. and Benin priorities. P activities focus on investing in people and support the Millennium Development goals for education, health, community health and HIV/AIDS. Other priority program areas include: decentralization, development of the private sector, information technology, and gender equality.

¶6. DoD: Political military cooperation under DoS and DoD programs focuses on professional training under IMET for the members of the Beninese Armed Forces (BAF) for work with civil society, members of the press, civil authorities and institutions of government on themes relative to peace keeping and the fight against terrorism. Under ACOTA, U.S. teams trained BAF for deployment for regional peacekeeping and provided requisite equipment. ACSS also since 1999 has presented seminars for senior civil and military personnel on issues related to civil society and security.

¶7. ADF: The African Development Foundation has funded projects in agro-processing, soap production, construction of rural roads, and improvement of medical care and infant nutrition.

¶8. Other USG Programs: Small grants, human rights, refugee and humanitarian assistance programs support grass roots projects, including support for democracy, the fight against female circumcision, election observation, publication of laws, and anti-child trafficking efforts. In conclusion, the Ambassador said that the USG and her Mission would continue to work hard with Benin on current programs and to seek opportunities for future cooperation.

//MCA-BENIN SESSION//

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¶9. In the afternoon session, the MCA-Benin National Coordinator outlined the unique quality of the MCC Compact, which gave to Benin the opportunity to define the major obstacles to growth in Benin and develop programs to address them. Adovelande's presentation carefully explained the consultations with civil society, government, and the private sector that led up to the Compact and the objectives of each project. He used this opportunity to reiterate to the representatives the consultative process and his interest in continued consultations with the Assembly.

¶10. The representatives expressed support for the Compact, posted questions, and raised their concerns at length. Many complained that the Benin Compact does not specifically support agriculture in a country that is primarily agricultural. Several asked the U.S. to help Africa by reconsidering its policy of subsidies for U.S. cotton producers. Others were disappointed that education was not part of the Compact and wanted more attention paid to micro-credit programs and direct help to small entrepreneurs. However, many other representatives praised the compact and its management and committed themselves to its support. A number of the representatives' questions related to previously shared and publicized information on selection of locations, especially for land titling and construction of courthouses. The National Coordinator well-used this opportunity to present carefully crafted and pertinent answers, demonstrating a leadership and elegant patience that is his trademark.

¶11. The MCA-Benin National Coordinator is concerned especially about the Assembly's development of national policy on the formalization of land titles. This was a special focus of journalists as they questioned the Assembly President. President Nago refused to go into details, preferring to emphasize the role of

the legislators in reviewing the facts and making thoughtful decisions on the options to be presented to them. He firmly expressed the Assembly's commitment to address this subject and to support the Compact.

¶12. Comment: There was broad positive print and media coverage of the "good news" USG outreach and presentation at Parliament. Not in recent memory, if ever, had a bilateral mission shared a country's cooperation program with lawmakers in such a fashion, according to the MCA-Benin National Coordinator who warmly appreciated the Ambassador's role and commitment. The speech and MCA-Benin presentation laid the groundwork for the Assembly's future cooperation with the Compact. This is significant, because the Assembly decision-making role in policy reform will be essential for many of the MCC Compact projects. End comment.

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